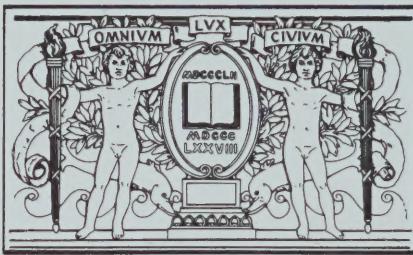


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## Boston Landmarks Commission

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Luis Overbea  
Carl A. Zellner

Marcia Myers,  
Executive Director

December 20, 1982

RE: PETITION #82.62  
PROPERTY: CITGO SIGN  
ADDRESS: Atop 660 Beacon Street  
Boston, Ma

Attached is the Study Report prepared by the Boston Landmarks Commission on the subject object which will be the subject of a Public Hearing to be held on January 11, 1983, at 5:30 P.M., at the Boston Redevelopment Authority Board Room, 9th Floor, Boston City Hall, Boston, Ma.

Sincerely,

*Marcia Myers*

Marcia Myers *bcc*  
Executive Director

Attachment: Study Report







Atop 660 Beacon St  
Per Dec 20, 1982 BLC  
Petition # 82.62 letter

Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission  
on the Potential Designation of

The Citgo Sign

as a

Landmark

under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975

FINE ARTS DEPT

Approved Marcia Myra 12/2/82  
(Executive Director) (Date)

Approved: Patricia Anne Howell 12/21  
(Chairman) (Date)

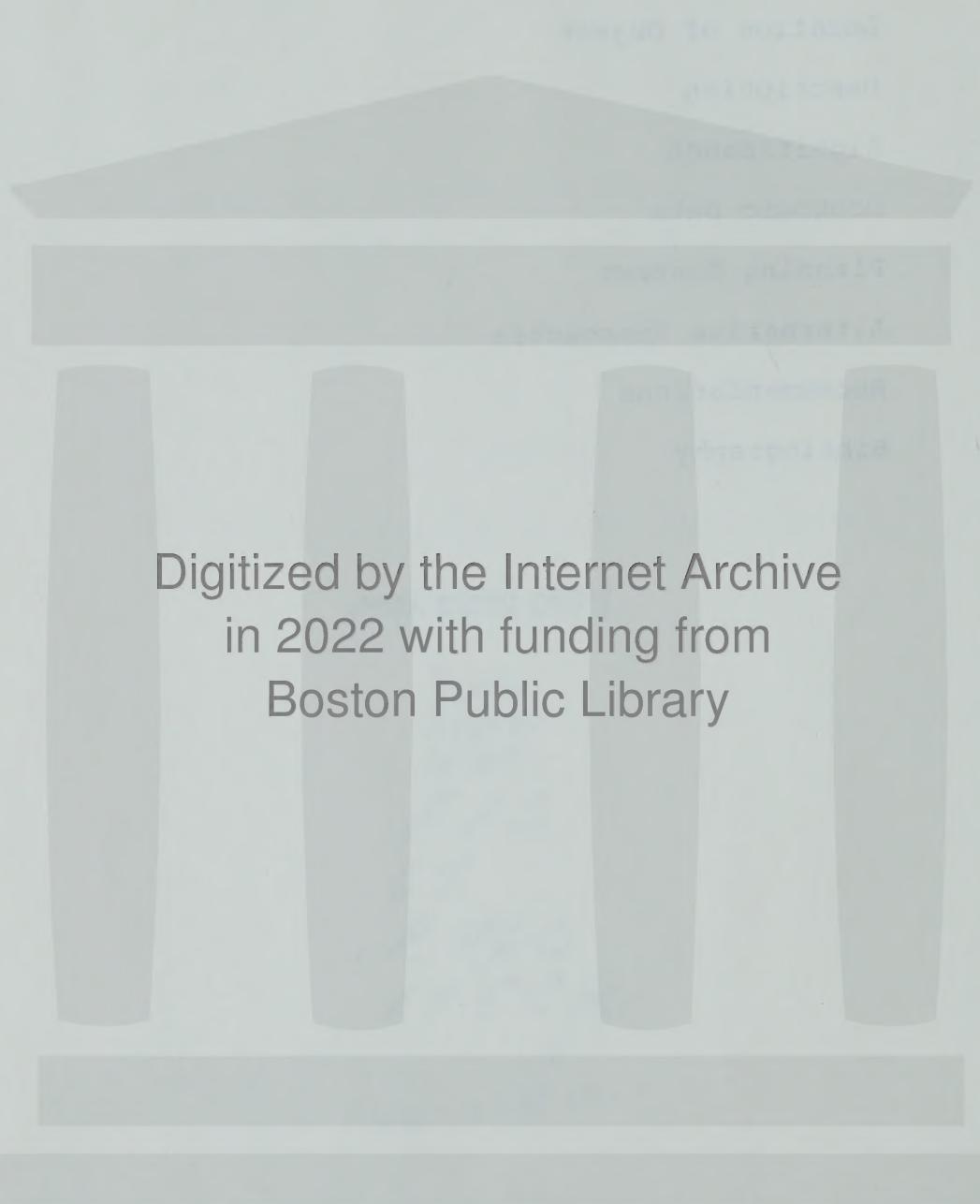
**FINE ARTS DEPT**

Boston  
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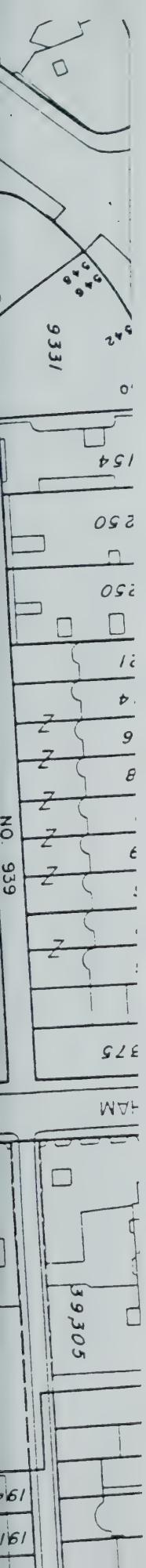
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- 1.0 Location of Object
- 2.0 Description
- 3.0 Significance
- 4.0 Economic Data
- 5.0 Planning Context
- 6.0 Alternative Approaches
- 7.0 Recommendations
- 8.0 Bibliography



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1.0 LOCATION OF OBJECT

1.1 The Citgo sign is located upon the roof of 660 Beacon Street, Boston, Ward 5, which is assessor's parcel number 3752 but which is not the subject of the report.

1.2 The Citgo sign is located in Kenmore Square which is a major commercial and transportation intersect at the western end of Back Bay. The area is characterized by four to six-story late 19th century and early 20th century commercial structures with lower floor entertainment and retail uses. A number of three and four-story rowhouses exist which are now occupied by retail and office uses. To the east to the north lies the Bay State Road/Back Bay West Architectural Conservation District. This district does not include the property which is the subject of this report. To the west lies the recently constructed rise residential and hotel structures and beyond that the institutional buildings of Boston Univers

1.3 Map showing site of object is attached.



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21	3500
22	3500
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25	2750
26	3250
27	3500
28	3500
29	3250
30	259
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A hand-drawn map of a residential area, rotated 45 degrees counter-clockwise. The map shows property boundaries and house numbers. A large property on the right is labeled 'SQUARE' vertically. A street is labeled 'STREET' at the bottom right. A house number '14,008' is written on a large property in the bottom left. A star symbol is located on a property in the center-right. A dashed line labeled 'MEDICAL' runs diagonally across the top. A property on the far left is labeled '6009' with an arrow pointing to it. House numbers visible include 2060, 1684, 1559, 1726, 2039, 12275, 2514, 2751, 2990, 3189, 3357, 3505, 3628, 3829, 3129, 2234, 2137, 2137, 2137, 2137, 2137, 2137, 11,875, 4178, 4135, 4182, 11,483, 7529, 3091, 4425, 3026, and 640.

904	4375
906	3125
910	3125
912	(3122
912	3126
912	(3129
916	3121
918	(3128
920	(3126
922	3124
924	3121
926	6250
928	6250
930	6154
932	340
934	342
936	346
938	348
940	9331
942	74841



2.0      DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT

2.1      Type and Use

The object under consideration for designation is a large sign, or billboard, that has two faces attached to a metal supporting framework. The roof (which is not subject to designation) of the building helps support the sign and framework. The faces have been illuminated with neon filled tubing and are used as an advertisement for the Cities Service Company. The sign is not now illuminated.

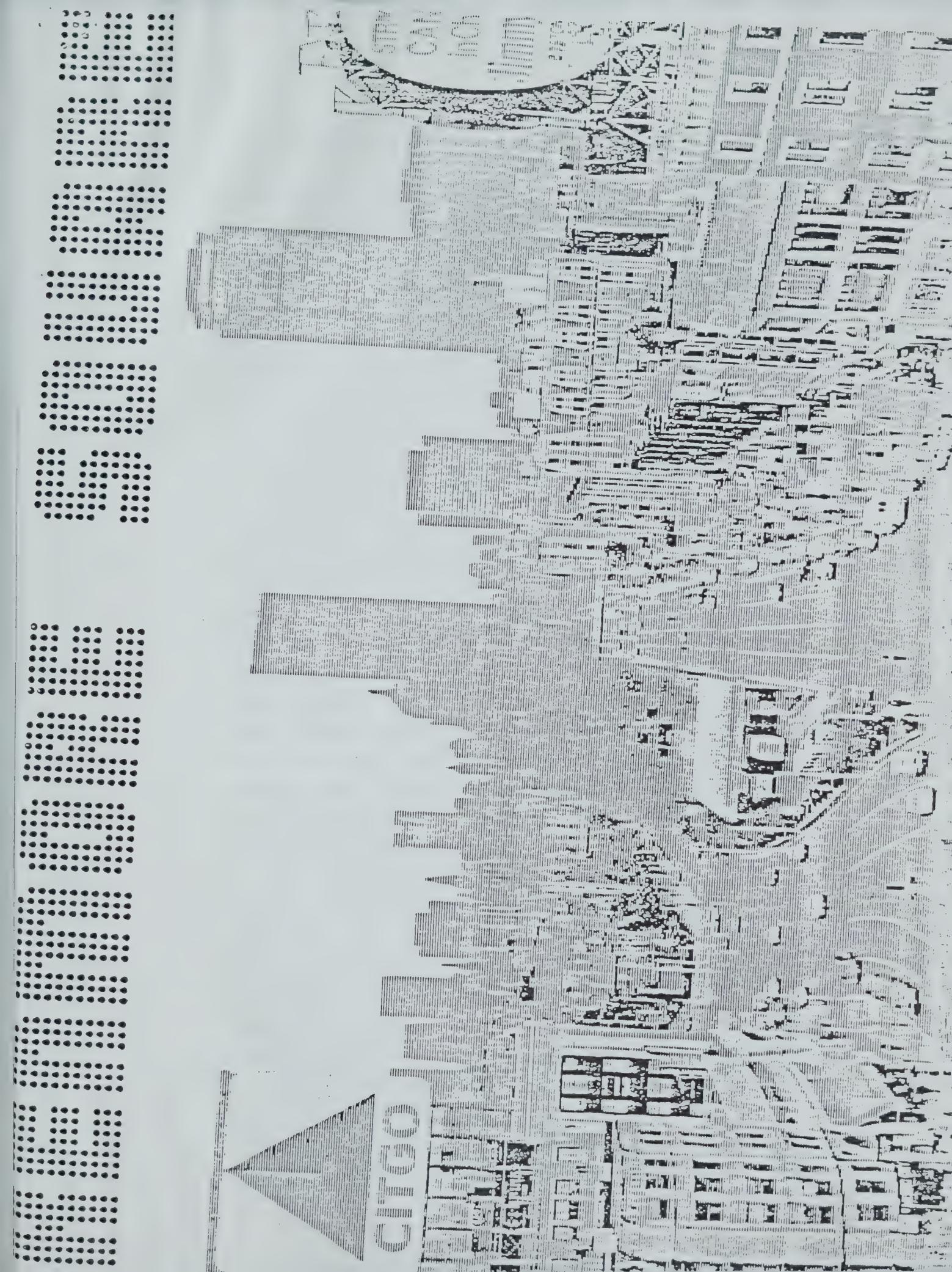
2.2      General Description

The Citgo sign is a large-scale display roughly six feet square with rounded corners with two faces, set back-to-back on a metal superstructure. The backs of the sign faces are painted white; a large equilateral triangle in three shades of red forming a delta shape fills the white field; under the triangle are block letters in blue which spell CITGO. The faces are covered with 5,878 neon-filled glass tubing in the colors corresponding to the delta and letters. The illumination has been directed by a computer-run device and the various electrical transformers and apparatus required for neon lighting.

The sign is roughly oriented in an east-west fashion so it can be seen from either direction, Beacon Street, Commonwealth Avenue, Storrow and Memorial Drives to name but the major transportation routes.

2.3      Photograph : Attached







3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OBJECT

3.1 History and Significance

The Citgo sign is a fine and locally very rare example of the spectacular neon display which, in its extravagant use of neon lighting, its marketing of petroleum products and its appeal to the moving automobile, represents a less energy conscious, highly automobile dominated period in America's cultural history. Technologically innovative in the history of advertising signs, it also is a key visual landmark on the Boston skyline.

"Spectacular displays", now a century old, began with a massive display of electric lights at a London Crystal Palace exhibit in 1882; the light show was controlled then by a hand operated panel. In 1892 a multiple electric light bulb display, on a side of the Flatiron Building on Broadway in New York, was the first use of a 'spectacular' on a structure. Rather quickly, the vogue spread, both in on and off-premise advertising. The signs and light shows were not only dazzling to pedestrians, they were increasingly designed at a scale appropriate to be seen from distances in approaching automobiles.

The automobile era, and its proliferation of roadways, combined with economical production of neon filled tubing in many ways revolutionized American sign advertising. Buildings in the later 19th century had often been covered with eye catching painted signs largely to indicate goods and services available within. The later glittering electric light displays were costly and needed large areas for maximum effect.

It was a Frenchman, Georges Claude, who in 1910 produced the first neon sign at the Grand Palais, and he



is credited with introducing neon for commercial applications. Many other scientists were responsible for developing lighting with neon gas. Claude successfully merged the craft of glass bending with his experiments with gases and electrification of neon by means of "bombardment". By 1915, the Claude Neon Company, through patent rights that finally expired in 1932, controlled the production of neon tubing. Claude Neon also developed an early system of franchises that operated internationally, including Boston. It is said that patent infringements were numerous (Stern, p. 24-25). The Claude Neon Company's Packard sign in Los Angeles in 1923 was the first neon sign in America (and reputedly still operated in 1979).

The twenties saw both the proliferation of neon advertising signs nationwide and the transition from the incandescent electric light shows to neon - giving rise to New York's Great White Way in the 1930's (Miller, p. 10). These 'spectaculars' as they came to be known, were often large-scale, multi-colored, with lively animated effects: eagles landing, figures dancing, liquids pouring to name a few of the popular illusions. Rudi Stern, a neon sculptor and chronicler of the neon craft, suggests that the end of Prohibition fostered the neon sign art, as the liquor industry spent millions to advertise their legally renewed products. He attributes the demise of wide-spread use of neon to the war years when the skilled craft of glass-benders and neon designers started to disperse. The availability of economical plastic back lit signs in the 1950's and 60's further depressed the popularity of neon, except of course in limited cities and along Las Vegas' renown Fremont Street.

The location of the present Citgo sign, known to its owner, the Cities Service Company, as the Citgo Spectacular Neon Display, has long been associated with



major illuminated, roof-top signs, particularly ones promoting the role of petroleum products. In 1940, the Cities Service Company replaced Socony/Mobil Oil's Pegasus sign with its first sign, also in neon, then an expanding circle and the Koolmotor name. Cities Service at the time occupied the building for offices. The sign's design went through several subsequent alterations as the corporate logo changed. It was not until 1962 that the delta, or triangular format was introduced by Cities Service. Three years later, the firm of Lippincott and Margulies of New York brought forward the blue Citgo and red Delta motif. It is speculated that the delta, or greek letter for D, was to refer to Henry L. Doherty, founder of the Cities Service Company. John Mohwar, advertising director of Cities Service at the time, is credited with implementing the newest logo and creating, with local sign companies, the "spectacular neon displays" in Boston, Chicago, New York, and Milwaukee" about 1965. From 1965 to 1979, with a year's intermission during the 1973 energy crisis, the Citgo sign was illuminated with the clear, crisp light show. The other displays were short-lived, and appear to have been terminated in 1970, leaving the Kenmore Square sign as the single significant survivor.

The operating Citgo sign was filmed two years after its installation. Donald Berman of Lincoln, Massachusetts filmed "Go, Go, Citgo", in 1967; the short, 3½ minute film received honors at the 1968 Yale Film Festival.

In addition to its role in the history of neon displays, the Citgo sign is important as a major geographically orienting device fulfilling the conventional definition as a landmark. Like steeples, clock towers and other visual silhouettes on the skyline, the sign visually marks and identifies the place of Kenmore Square, a fact noted in several reports and publications.



Kenmore Square since the late 1950's has sported a concentration of roof-top signs, dominated for a time by both the White Fuel and Cities Service signs. In View From the Road (1964), the authors characterized Kenmore Square as unique "with its giant advertising signs facing in all directions" (p. 49). The 1971 City Signs and Lights policy study devoted to Boston's sign and public lighting problems, includes specific favorable comments to public questionnaires to the CITGO sign as the singular billboard in the city that deserved to remain (p. 261). A 1976 Urban Design Study prepared and published by Harvard graduate students identified the CITGO sign as a "landmark billboard" and described the contrast of the flashy signs and dignified architecture as one of the special and distinctive features of Kenmore Square.

The Citgo sign is also significant in the history of Boston's exterior advertising. Of the thousands of signs that have been hung, mounted, or hinged in Boston, a select few have survived as examples of the signmaker's craft, of designs and styles that reflect various eras, and of the important goods and services of the particular culture. Some of the smaller advertisements have been placed inside museums for protection and preservation. The 1697/1701 Painter's arms, a hand carved wooden guild sign is the earliest and can be seen at the Bostonian Society. The renown 1874 tea kettle of the former Oriental Tea Company still hangs on the Sears Block at Government Center, several times restored. At eight different locations on busy commercial streets in Boston's neighborhoods, are street clocks, in different states of repair, set up as public timepieces but owned and maintained by the establishment printed on the face. Now removed to the Museum of Fine Arts, the 1928 Clock sign of the



former Bigelow-Kennard jewelers represents an abstract Art Deco motif. Closer in age and style to the Citgo spectacular is the Paramount Theatre marquee; the light bulbs covered over by later plastic and metal housing and in unknown condition, it illustrates the glittery extravagances of the movie and entertainment industry. The Coca-Cola sign along Storrow Drive shares the later 20th century spectacular display model with Citgo, but it remains Boston's only moving neon sign lit by night. It is not particularly recognizable during the daytime.

As an advertising device, the Citgo sign is inherently a valuable piece for study of its period and technology. While its use of neon and the sizeable amount of neon tubing are not unusual, the use of a computer, allegedly the first, to direct the sign's lightshow, and the hard-edged, simple bold graphics in both daytime and nighttime versions, provide a unique exterior and highly public example of Pop Art that prevailed in 1960's. Neither Boston nor the Commonwealth have any other comparable design elements; the fact that the Boston sign of Cities Service's four 1965 neon displays is the only one remaining categorically indicates its rarity.

### 3.2

#### Relationship to the Criteria for Landmark Designation

The Citgo sign fulfills the definition in Chapter 772 of "Improvement" in that it is an object which constitutes an exterior betterment of a real property. The definition of "Landmark" in Chapter 772 includes an improvement "designated by the commission in accordance with section four as a physical feature or improvement which in whole or part has historical, social, cultural, architectural or aesthetic significance to the city and the commonwealth, the New England region or the nation." Section 4 provides that the commission must find that the designation meets one or more of the stated criteria. The staff based on information



presented in this report, considers that the Citgo sign meets one of the four criteria, because it is a man-made object representative of elements of design and craftsmanship which embody distinctive characteristics of a type inherently valuable for study of a period and method of construction. It is of cultural significance in representing a popular cultural, urban aesthetic influenced by technology and springing in part from our automobile oriented age.



4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

4.1 Current Ownership and Status

The Citgo sign is owned by Cities Service Company of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The steel structural framework, which is not subject of the study report or designation, is owned by University-Brink of Watertown, MA. The Cities Service Company, in its correspondence with the Boston Landmarks Commission staff, has stated that it intends to remove the sign because of corporate marketing decisions. Cities has cancelled its maintenance agreement with University-Brink and has not entered into a long-term lease with the new building owner, Boston University.

Cities has provided information on costs associated with the Citgo sign that fall into six categories: rental base, maintenance, insurance, utility charges, governmental permit fees and taxes, and refurbishing. The summarized cost information follows.

rent:	projected by Cities to be \$2,500 per month.
maintenance:	projected by Cities based on contents of previous agreements and 1982 dollars to be \$5,380 per month.
insurance:	not projected .
utilities:	not projected for 1982 dollars, but averaged \$413.60/month during its last operational year.
fees & taxes:	not projected .
refurbishing:	projected estimate to be \$50,000 .

Because the object serves the company as an advertising sign, income derived from it is extremely difficult to calculate.



## 5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

### 5.1 Relationship to Current Zoning & Sign Regulations

The Kenmore Square area is zoned B-4, general business district with a maximum F.A.R. of 4, and one in which billboards can be allowed. Any sign is subject to the Boston Sign code but regulation of off-premise billboards, that is signs advertising goods or services not sold on the premises, are under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Outdoor Advertising Board. The Citgo sign was erected prior to the establishment of the Boston Sign Code.

### 5.2 Current Planning Issues

The character of the Kenmore Square commercial area has emerged as a retail and entertainment center. Current planning efforts suggest that a comprehensive, visible program of rehabilitation is required to re-establish a sense of balance and character to this important and well-located commercial center. Both public and private investment are needed. Basic to the improvement of Kenmore Square is the preparation of a comprehensive study and plan for the area geared toward introducing a more permanent, balanced population. A step in this direction was made within the last years as Boston University, the Red Sox, local banks and other major interests in the Square sponsored a consultant study which assembled data, analyzed existing problems, and made recommendations to identify the Square's future development potential. Enforcement of existing ordinances (zoning, parking, sign, sanitation) is another necessary step in upgrading the Square.

Traffic circulation and parking is another district wide issue which affects the immediate neighborhood. The heavy traffic volumes and circulation and parking problems in Fenway-Kenmore affect not only drivers



and pedestrians but also the district's air quality, noise levels and open space facilities. The situation is most critical during the morning and evening commuter peak periods and when Red Sox games are being played in Fenway Park.



## 6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

### 6.1 Alternatives

Alternatives open to the Boston Landmarks Commission include designation of the object as a Landmark, not designating the object at all, or recommending that the block of buildings (on one of which the Citgo sign stands) be included in the Bay State Road/Back Bay West Architectural Conservation District and, after due process, amending the above designated district.

An alternative approach would be the inclusion of the object in the National Register of Historic Places. Although this would provide some protection from Federally sponsored or licensed action, it would provide none from private action. Unlike the Boston Landmarks Commission, the National Register includes a stipulation that properties less than 50 years old are not normally considered for nomination unless a property has achieved significance of exceptional importance within the last 50 years.

### 6.2 Impact of Alternatives

The first alternative, Landmark designation, would mean that exterior changes to the sign would require prior approval from the Landmarks Commission.

The second alternative would mean the sign receives no protection.

The third alternative, amending the existing Architectural Conservation District, would also require a separate petition, hearing, and designation process that would be a year long process at the minimum.



## 7.0

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission finds that the object, the CITGO sign, does meet the criteria for landmark designation as found in Sections 2 and 4 of Chapter 772, Acts of 1975, for reasons cited in Section 3 of this report.

Due to the complex legal and policy issues surrounding designation of this object, notwithstanding its finding in the first paragraph above, the staff withholds recommendation to designate the CITGO sign as a Landmark pending opinion of counsel, and consideration of policy issues by the Commission.



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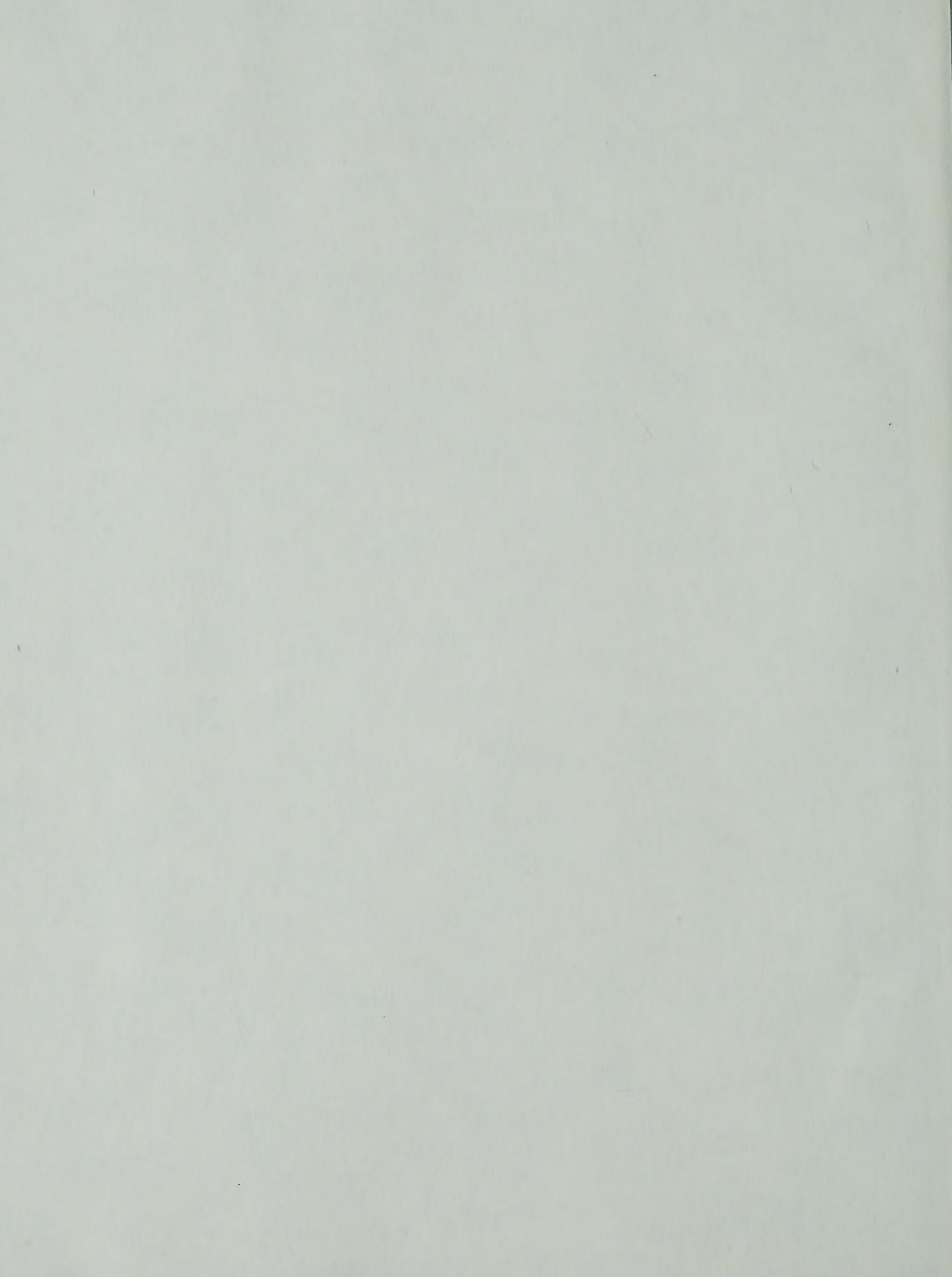
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